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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TUNIS 001988

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STATE FOR NEA/MAG (MHARRIS)  
NEA/PPD (AFERNANDEZ)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/04/2016

TAGS: PREL PGOV KPAO TS

SUBJECT: TFLE01: SITREP ON TUNISIAN SOLIDARITY WITH  
"LEBANESE RESISTANCE"

REF: A. TUNIS 1922

1B. TUNIS 1943

1C. TUNIS 1939

1D. BEIRUT 2534

11. (C) Summary. Media reports and anecdotal information from the past week suggest that Tunisians increasingly are viewing Hizballah as the underdog freedom fighter successfully standing up against the Israeli bully. The Qana attack stoked a round of news-driven anger against Israel. U.S. support for Israel in the current crisis is having a negative effect on public perceptions of the United States and is deepening local suspicions about U.S. goals in the region. Washington should take tangible steps to reaffirm U.S. concern for the suffering of innocent Lebanese civilians. One such measure would be the quick, limited re-opening of Beirut International Airport, as suggested by Embassy Beirut (reftel D, para 12). Active U.S. involvement in reopening the airport and getting life in Lebanon back to normal would be a clear demonstration of our support for the GOL and should also help stem negative Tunisian (and Arab) feelings towards the United States. End summary.

12. (SBU) The following are this week's reactions from the GOT, the press, political parties, and civil society groups on the situation in Lebanon.

GOT REACTION

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-- (U) The GOT organized a national blood drive August 1-3 in support of the Lebanese people.

-- (U) The GOT canceled local performing arts exhibitions during a three-day mourning period after the Israeli attack on Qana. Six singers who were scheduled to appear the Carthage International Music Festival canceled their performances. One of them called on other singers to set up "humanitarian assistance" convoys for Lebanon.

-- (SBU) A Tunisian employee of the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA) sent a harangue against U.S. policy and actions in an e-mail to the Embassy's Office of Public Affairs and asked to be removed from any listserv distributing information on the United States. It was not clear if she was acting on her own initiative or that of FIPA's.

POLITICAL PARTY REACTION

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-- (SBU) Post received a fax August 2 from Secretary General

of the People's Unity Party Mohammed Bouchiha condemning "the savage attacks" Israel is conducting in Lebanon and Palestine. Bouchiha demanded that the U.S. immediately stop the "blood bath that Israel has caused," and added that the U.S. Government is "totally responsible" for "this war of fire."

-- (SBU) The embassy received other faxes along similar lines. One of them described that Israeli military activity in Lebanon is actually a U.S. attack on Lebanon. Another fax indicated that a Tunisian youth, described as a "political prisoner" from the An Nahdha Movement and the General Tunisian Students Union, was on a hunger strike because of U.S. policy in the region.

#### MEDIA REACTION

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-- (U) The government-run "La Presse" printed three statements by Ismail Boulahia of the Social Democratic Movement (MDS), Mondher Thabet of the Social Liberal Party (PSL), and Mohammed Bouchiha of the People's Unity Party praising President Ben Ali for condemning the Israeli offensive. The PSL asked the U.S. administration to adjust its policy toward the Arab world, whereas the MDS stated it will hold another demonstration in Tunis on August 4. The editorial from Bouchiha reiterated the points made in his letter, accusing the U.S. of being "politically and morally responsible" for the situation.

-- (U) The stridently anti-American "As-Shourouq" newspaper (circulation 80,000) continues its sensationalist coverage. Its reporting is typically accompanied by graphic photos of dead Lebanese civilians, pro-Hizballah headlines, and political cartoons portraying both Israel and the U.S. as

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aggressors. The political cartoon in the Aug. 3 depicted IAF jets bombing and strafing a bullet-ridden Statue of Liberty. It also carried the same photo of Hizballah leader Nasrallah 11 times. An article quoted Lebanese Communist Party leader Khaled Haddadah (sic) as saying that Israeli military action in Lebanon "is a war by agency" for the United States, which seeks to impose its project for a "new Middle East" on the region. Other recent headlines cheer on Hizballah, such as the August 3 front-page story reading "Hizballah missiles strike 5,000 Israeli homes."

-- (U) "Al-Mawqif", the eight-page weekly bulletin published by the Progressive Democratic Party opposition, gives front-page coverage in its current edition of a demonstration in Tunis that took place on August 1 in protest of the Israeli attack on Qana. With labor union leaders at the head, an estimated five thousand citizens reportedly took part in the protest. A placard that reads "Death to Israel" is clearly visible in the photo of the demonstration illustrating the lead story.

-- (U) A sidebar in "Le Temps" commented on Mel Gibson's recent statement that "the Jews have started all wars." The author, agreeing with the quote, commended Gibson for saying "what three-quarters of the planet already thinks." He went on to say that the Bible and the Koran share Gibson's view.

#### IRANIAN EMBASSY

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-- (U) The Iranian Embassy in Tunis released a statement on Aug. 2 condemning the Qana attack. The statement said that "the malice of this wrathful entity (Israel)" is drawing out "popular anger in a number of countries" because of "this crime which the Zionist entity perpetrated." The statement was carried by several Tunisian newspapers.

## CIVIL SOCIETY

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-- (SBU) Our informal soundings of coffee-shop opinion indicate that many Tunisians believe that Americans are ignorant of Middle East issues and that they blindly support U.S. policy in the region. Some express surprise when they find out that there is a diversity of views in the U.S. about the direction of U.S. policy. Such an outlook has long been commonplace, and supports the assessment held by many outsiders that Tunisians derive their opinions about the U.S. from narrowly focused, biased, and repetitive sources of information.

-- (U) The Secretary General of the Tunisian Labor Union (UGTT) Abdesselem Jerad traveled last week to the Lebanon-Syrian border to give out humanitarian aid to the Lebanese. Members of the UGTT agreed to send their union premiums for two months to the Lebanese people.

-- (C) Five individuals representing different civil society groups in Tunisia met with us on Aug. 4 to voice their criticism of US policy towards Lebanon and to deliver a letter addressed to "the Ambassador". The letter condemned "American support for Israeli aggression and war crimes" and disapproved of "America's efforts to block a UNSC resolution condemning Israel and demanding an immediate cease-fire." Among those present were representatives of the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD), the Tunisian League of Human Rights (LTDH), the Bar Association of Tunis, the Tunisian National Council on Liberties (CNLT), and the Tunisian Chapter of Amnesty International. The individuals told Charge at the meeting that they had appreciated the U.S.'s outspoken support and help for their organizations against harassment by the GOT. They are, however, fervently against the U.S. stance in the Lebanon situation.

## COMMENT

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¶3. (C) Comment: We detect a not-so-subtle shift in local media reporting about Lebanon in the past week, with the government-controlled press increasingly portraying Hizballah as the underdog freedom fighter fending off unjustifiable attacks by the "Israeli aggressor". Nasrallah himself tends to come off as an able war-time leader and defender of Lebanese and Arab rights. The GOT's firm support of "its Lebanese and Palestinian brothers" remains unwavering (Refs A and B). The Government tightly controls public gatherings and

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any future display of public anger at Israel -- or even the U.S. -- will no doubt be under watchful security eyes, and even with GOT support. To many Tunisians, U.S. support for Israel in the current crisis has deepened suspicions here about U.S. interests in the Middle East. Even our announced desire to usher in a "new Middle East" in the aftermath of the current hostilities is viewed by many Tunisians as code for U.S. and Israeli domination.

¶4. (C) At this juncture, it is perhaps too early to tell how the Lebanon hostilities have affected US democracy and public diplomacy goals in the region. However, we believe that Washington should take tangible steps to counter any rising tide of negativity directed against the U.S., and to reaffirm our concern for the suffering of innocent Lebanese civilians.

One such concrete measure would be the quick re-opening of Beirut International Airport to commercial air service. Reftel D para 12 has suggested this as a possible next step in the post-cease fire environment. We urge Washington to examine this proposal. We defer to others as to the security aspects of the idea, but from our vantage point in Tunis active U.S. involvement in getting the airport re-opened, and getting life in Lebanon back to normal, would be a welcome antidote to the recent wave of sensationalist and biased news

reporting, and the negative effect that has had on Tunisian perceptions of the U.S. It would also be a concrete demonstration of our support for the Siniora government.

BALLARD